

# THE WHITE RED MEN

## The Improved Order of Red Men in Minnesota, 1875–1920

Edward J. Pluth

Minnesota has long been home to a diverse number of national fraternal and benevolent secret societies, including the Ancient Order

of Hibernians, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Knights of Pythias, the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows, the Royal Arcanum, the Independent Order of Foresters, and the Woodmen of the World. Another

fraternal secret society, the Improved Order of Red Men, is much less familiar to the general public. The national order, established in the 1830s, instituted its first Minnesota “tribe” (lodge) in 1875. After an uncertain start, the state’s organization reached its largest number of chapters (53) by 1901 and its peak membership (4,941) by 1903. Although the number of lodges and their membership began a gradual decline in the years following, the organization still retains a small Minnesota presence.<sup>1</sup>

What is the Improved Order of Red Men? The IORM, whose basic precepts are “Freedom, Friendship, and Charity,” is a national secret fraternal and benevolent organization similar to other national fraternal societies. Unlike other societies, however, the IORM’s organizational nomenclature, officers, rituals, regalia, costumes, and other paraphernalia were and are based on its perception and imaging of American Indian names, customs, objects, symbols, and myths. As historian Philip Deloria observed, in the United States, from the colonial era to the present, “national definitions have engaged racialized and gendered Indians in curious and contradictory ways.” The IORM is a clear illustration of that practice.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1893 *Official History of the Improved Order of Red Men*, Charles

A membership certificate, or “diploma,” for the Improved Order of Red Men, 1889. Note busts of George Washington and Tammany (Tamanend, a leader of the Lenni-Lenape nation in the 1600s), at top. The vignettes of imagined scenes of Native American life and cultures include “Be merciful to the stranger found astray in the forest” (upper left) and a depiction of the arrival of Christopher Columbus with the caption, “And hath made of one blood all the nations on the face of the earth” (bottom center). The Improved Order of Red Men renamed the months as various “moons” and counted the year from the “Great Sun of Discovery,” or the arrival of Columbus.



Litchman stated, “our Order is founded on the customs of the Aborigines of the American continent” and claimed, “The value of [our] ceremonies . . . is their historical accuracy. They seek not merely to imitate, but to preserve.” Reflecting the common, and mistaken, conjecture of the time, Litchman declared, “When the time comes that the Indian race is extinct, our Order will [become] at once the interpreter of Indian customs and the repository of Indian traditions. Could a higher destiny await any organization?”<sup>3</sup>

While Litchman expressed the nature of the organization’s origin and purpose, the organization itself, as well as the set of presumptions underlying the IORM’s aim, would not be without its critics. Indeed, Litchman, in passing, referenced criticism of the organization “because of our title, and the supposed barbarism of our ceremonials,” but brushed it aside.<sup>4</sup>

More serious critics early on recognized, in today’s terms, the racist aspects of the organization’s assumption of the “disappearing” Indian and its misrepresentation of Native American customs, dress, and rituals. The Red Men contributed—both within their membership and in their public appearances—to the larger public’s continued racist views and misunderstanding about Native Americans and their lives within American society. An item about the Red Men in an 1880 issue of the Dakota mission newspaper *Iapi Oaye* (*The Word Carrier*) lamented, “What tomfoolery is this? It is a pity that sensible, civilized white men have nothing better to do than play at being savages.” Reflecting the “civilization of the Indian” mentality of the time, the piece concluded, “As the Indian casts off his savage toggery and goes to work as an honest man, the idle white man picks it up and plays in it like a boy.”<sup>5</sup>

A century later, historian Philip Deloria, using that same concept in his book *Playing Indian*, disparagingly observed,

By insisting that real Indians were disappearing or had already vanished, the Improved Order was able to narrate and perform a fraternal Indian history without having to account for the actions of real Indian people. . . . [Their] ritual had everything to do with custodial history—the preservation of a vital part of America’s past. The Improved Order painted itself as a gathering of historians, the worthy keepers of the nation’s aboriginal roots.

Anthropologist Luke Eric Lassiter, in reviewing Deloria’s work, argues, “to understand Indian play is to also understand the role and meaning of race in U.S. history. While white Americans have consistently used Indian representations to empower themselves, they have also consistently denied power to actual Native people.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Shari Huhndorf, professor of Native American Studies at the University of California–Berkeley, contends in her book *Going Native* that into the twentieth century,

going native has served as an essential means of defining and regenerating racial whiteness and a racially inflected vision of Americanness. . . . While those who go native frequently claim benevolence toward native peoples, they reaffirm white dominance by making some (usually distorted) vision of native life subservient to the needs of the colonial culture.

A more recent critic rightly argued that the IORM “reflects popular, white

middle class romantic notions of the American Indian rather than culturally accurate ones.”<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the histories and cultures of hundreds of distinct Native American nations have been conflated, distorted, and denied, with a resulting generally negative impact on American Indian peoples. Native Americans have attempted to educate non-Natives since their first encounters with Europeans. After the treaty era, activists have worked to educate non-Indians, assert treaty rights, and address ongoing political harms to Native peoples. They formed the Committee of One Hundred in the 1920s and the National Congress of American Indians in the 1940s. In the 1960s, the Red Power Movement led to the rise of hundreds of Native organizations today. Yet the criticisms directed at the IORM seem not to have been a significant deterrent to the organization’s continued existence. Now centered in Waco, Texas, it remains active to the present day, including in Minnesota.<sup>8</sup>

## THE NATIONAL IMPROVED ORDER OF RED MEN

Because the Minnesota IORM functions under the authority of the national organization, it will be helpful to provide a brief account of that group in order to better understand the character of the Minnesota order. While the order traces its roots to revolutionary-era secret patriotic organizations—the Sons of Liberty, the Sons of St. Tammany, and, circa 1813, the Society of Red Men—the formal organization began in 1834 in Baltimore, Maryland. This was just as Andrew Jackson’s Indian removal policy forcibly expelled tens of thousands of people who belonged to southern tribes from their homelands on the Trail of Tears. With seemingly deliberate historical irony,



the Improved Order focused its orientation on those more northeastern Native American nations (Iroquois and Algonquian) who had already supposedly “vanished.”<sup>9</sup>

As the order began to expand, the Maryland Great Council perceived the necessity of forming a more extensive organization to exercise “control and authority” over its growth. Toward that end, the Red Men met in Baltimore in 1847 and officially established the Great Council of the United States. In the years following, the order underwent significant growth and by 1875 had expanded to include chapters in 32 states.<sup>10</sup>

The 1847 Great Council also adopted a constitution, bylaws, and general laws for the governance of the order. These documents underwent continual revision over the years as the organization responded to a variety of issues and questions relating to membership, regalia, ceremonies, ritual, discipline, governing structure, finance, and other matters that arose with the organization’s growth. The council functioned through elected officers along with a number of permanent and temporary committees. At annual meetings held each September, representatives from state councils elected the officers and made the major decisions affecting the operation of the national and state organizations.<sup>11</sup>

The Great Council had the authority to approve the organization of individual lodges in the states (called “reservations”), which was important to the growth of the order. After a state’s lodges met the proper requirements, the national Great Council could approve formation of state Great Councils, which then exercised authority over the lodges within that state along with power to establish new chapters therein. The governing structure of both the national level and the state Great Councils and local lodges represented a traditional organization’s combination of elected and appointed officers, but with appropriated titles such as sachem (chief), incohonee (president), prophet (past president), and sannap (an appointed functionary).<sup>12</sup>

### CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES

Like other secret societies, the IORM incorporated a variety of “regalia, paraphernalia, flags, colors, mottoes,”

passwords, and other practices as part of its customs and ceremonies. The order also designated particular colors for the regalia (clothing, sashes) of each of the order’s officers and degrees. Original degrees included adoption, hunter, warrior, and chief, but by 1898 the hunter’s degree had been discontinued. The chapters had degree teams responsible for demonstrating the degree work and performing the elaborate rituals used for initiating members into the several degrees. Lectures were designed to teach lessons about each degree, while the degree work itself was “intended to present beautiful tableaux to the eye, to teach historical lessons to the mind, and to impress fraternal principles upon the heart.” The specific types of work for each degree and the requirements to be met before a member could apply for the next degree were part of the “secret work of the order.”<sup>13</sup>

The IORM regarded its “primary function” for its members to be one of “benevolence and protection.” As befitting a benevolent society, chapters had a responsibility to provide specified benefits for their members and member survivors. These included the call to visit the sick, to relieve the distressed, to bury the dead “with a respectful Christian burial,” to educate the orphaned, to assist widows, and to “keep an open, keyless treasury for deserving charity.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the order had other significant expectations of its members. In a speech to the Minnesota state council at its 1908 convention, Winona mayor E. S. Muir reflected both the Victorian era’s emphasis on masculinity and the organization’s patriotic orientation, by emphasizing that members had a responsibility for the “up-building of American manhood and the safeguarding of our freedom” as a “duty to our forefathers.” Similarly, Will E. Cowles, editor of *The*



*A badge for Ojibwa Tribe Number 5 of the Improved Order of Red Men based in Superior, Wisconsin, about 1900.*

*Speaking Leaf*, the order's newsletter for the Minnesota region, asserted that "Redmanship means good citizenship. [Its] precepts . . . inspire to better and nobler manhood."<sup>15</sup>

Further reflecting the organization's patriotic emphasis, Thomas J. Reed of Minneapolis, Minnesota's 1908 great sachem, asserted, "we teach and promote loyalty. Our mission is to protect and defend Constitutional rights and liberties." Comparably, other news reports affirmed that the organization's "purpose . . . and in fact, its entire aim is to stimulate and preserve a spirit of patriotism among its members" and declared its "proudest claim is that they are loyal and patriotic American citizens."<sup>16</sup>

Although the IORM claimed as one purpose the preservation of Native American traditions, Minnesota newspaper coverage of the organization's local and state activities, including its own publicity releases, often reflected stereotypical and racist terminology without any apparent sense of the irony or its negative impact on Native Americans. News stories referred to "Reds," "War Path," "Braves," "peaceful raid," "redskins," "palefaces," "braves like to get scalps," "squaws and papooses," "blood curdling war cries," "stalwart bucks," "war paint," "the bloody scalping knife," and "Heap Big Injun Talk." These views and terms were common and accepted at the time among white Americans, who appear to have raised little objection, at least publicly. As Deloria significantly points out, in the early 1900s Native people engaged in "a rash of protests" against the IORM's denial of their existence.<sup>17</sup>

## ESTABLISHING A PRESENCE IN MINNESOTA

Initial steps to form a chapter in Minnesota began with the election of five officers at a meeting in St. Paul on De-

cember 31, 1874, followed by another meeting January 6, 1875. In April, the group was officially instituted as Minnehaha Tribe No. 1, becoming one of the 582 IORM chapters then existing in 32 states. Although a news account optimistically concluded, "indications are that it will be a vigorous and influential organization," such would not be the case, for the lodge was declared defunct in 1881. Little is known of that organization's activities beyond the several social events reported in the newspaper. Lingering memories of the US-Dakota War of 1862 did not contribute to a favorable time for a new organization with the name Red Men. Likewise, a serious national depression in the 1870s was a poor time to be dependent on dues and fees for survival.<sup>18</sup>

By the mid-1880s, economic conditions had improved and the Great Council of Illinois, which then had jurisdiction over Minnesota, organized Hiawatha Tribe No. 2 in 1886 and Cherokee Tribe No. 3 in 1888, both in Minneapolis. During their brief life span, these two chapters held elections, worked on degrees, and sponsored dances and other "literary and musical" entertainments for members, wives, and guests. But, as with the 1875 group, these two chapters were short-lived, and the Great Council of the United States took control of Minnesota organizing in 1892.<sup>19</sup>

There is no record of the reactions of the Dakota and Ojibwe people living in Minnesota as the Improved Order of Red Men began to organize.

The third, and successful, effort to organize the IORM in Minnesota happened after 1889, when W. Clifford McCord moved to Minneapolis from Iowa, where he had been active in the Des Moines organization. His work resulted in the institution of a new Minnehaha Tribe No. 1 in mid-January 1893. The deputy inchoonee (president) of the national

Great Council, William A. Gulick, conducted the installation ceremony, supervised the election of officers, and instructed the members in the "signs, grips, signals, passwords and other secret work of the order." By August the chapter had gained some 150 members, approved a constitution and bylaws, formed a degree team, conferred several degrees, and claimed to be "strong in wealth, membership, and faith." The national organization approved the lodge's charter application at its annual September convention.<sup>20</sup>

Discussion of establishing a lodge in St. Paul began in early March 1893, but actual institution of the Minnewaukan Tribe No. 2 there did not occur until April 1894. In the meantime, reports of the possibility of chapters forming in Mankato, Anoka, Winona, Albert Lea, and elsewhere led the Minnehaha Tribe at its October 1893 meeting to appoint Charles H. Brown the deputy great inchoonee for Minnesota. Along with the organization's Minnesota Advisory Board, Brown would be responsible for promoting the order and instituting new lodges in Minnesota and part of Wisconsin. A year later, however, only one other chapter, Hiawatha Tribe No. 3, in Minneapolis, had been instituted.<sup>21</sup>

## STATEWIDE GROWTH

In November 1894, the national order's great inchoonee, A. H. Paton, visited the Twin Cities to meet with the two chapters, speaking at a banquet that included members of the press and the public and talking about the order's history and its goals. For Paton, "fraternal orders have a great mission to perform in overcoming the selfish tendencies of American life." Paton's visit seems to have boosted interest in the order in various areas of the state, and some members believed Minnesota could even

organize a state Great Council in early 1895. Paton went so far as to suggest that the annual meeting of the Great Council of the United States could be held in Minneapolis in 1896.<sup>22</sup>

State incohonee Charles Brown, in his report to Paton in February 1895, acknowledged Paton's influence on "the substantial growth" of the order through his "inspiring words and valuable suggestions," which infused members "with energy and determination." Brown believed the order would grow despite the hard economic times and the competition for members from the many secret and benevolent societies then present in Minnesota.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the organization grew rapidly in Minnesota, and by April 1895 it had 11 chapters, five each in Minneapolis and St. Paul and one in Stillwater, with a claimed membership of 605. Other lodges would soon be organized outside the Twin Cities area. Having reached the national criteria to form a Minnesota Great Council, the past sachems (chiefs) submitted a formal petition to be granted a charter for that purpose. Upon Paton's approval, members planned the institution of the council for May 13 at the Masonic Temple in Minneapolis. Paton, another national officer, and delegations from Iowa and Nebraska would assist with the formal ceremony and ritual of institution.<sup>24</sup>

The 18 past sachems of the 11 chapters constituted the newly formed Minnesota Great Council, with six sachems elected and four appointed to council offices. The council also adopted a constitution and bylaws to govern it and the Minnesota lodges now under its jurisdiction. Following the official business meeting, members attended a reception and dance at the Lyceum Theater. As part of the formal process, the national order's Great Council had to approve the charter at its annual meeting in

September. It did so, but at some point unidentified sources protested that decision, claiming Minnesota did not have the required 500 members "in good standing"; therefore, it would be a financial burden on the order and "was too young and not yet firmly grounded." Paton overruled the objections, saying the state met the order's legal requirements for organizing state councils.<sup>25</sup>

The Minnesota Great Council next met in July 1895 in St. Paul and elected, appointed, and installed ("raised up to the stump") a new set of officers. The key discussion item focused on the steps to be taken to convince the national Great Council to hold its 1896 annual meeting in Minneapolis. At the 1895 national convention, Minnesota great incohonee Charles H. Brown presented the state's formal invitation, which was referred to the Committee on Finance. That committee recommended the 1896 convention be held in Minneapolis, rather than Nashville, which had also campaigned for the meeting, and the convention adopted the majority report. The Minnesota Great Council thus had a year to prepare for the forty-ninth national Great Sun Council, the only one ever to be held in Minnesota.<sup>26</sup>

The Minnesota Great Council and the chapters continued with their traditional activities. In February 1896, the Minnesota Council held a special meeting to organize the Past Sachems Association of Minnesota and confer the past sachems' degree on all individuals who had served in the post. The national order had earlier authorized such an organization for former sachems in all states. The Minnesota association continued to grow as former sachems were elected to the organization. Members sought to "promote the harmony and advance the welfare of the order," which included official visits to the various

state lodges. An executive committee provided leadership.<sup>27</sup>

## ANNUAL GREAT SUN COUNCILS

The major event for 1896, of course, was the order's national Great Sun Council, which took place in Minneapolis over five days beginning September 7. Diverse committees planned a variety of events to welcome and entertain an expected several hundred delegates from state councils, along with their wives and other visitors. A good share of the convention time would be devoted to official order business, but some afternoons and most evenings were open for other events to showcase the Twin Cities, to demonstrate local hospitality, and to encourage visitor spending.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to welcoming speeches by Minnesota governor David Marston Clough and Minneapolis mayor Robert Pratt, other activities comprised receptions, banquets, and trolley and carriage tours of local sights, including Minnehaha Falls, Como Park, and Fort Snelling. Members of the women's auxiliary, called the Degree of Pocahontas, sponsored or participated in a number of these events. Decorations from a just-concluded Minneapolis carnival remained, and local businesses also decorated their stores with order colors. At its conclusion, the Great Council adopted a resolution expressing its pleasure with and appreciation for their stay in Minneapolis and thanking all, including the press, for their hospitality.<sup>29</sup>

The Minnesota Great Council held its own annual Great Sun Council each August. Beginning with Winona in 1898, the annual state councils were held in cities around the state until 1910, when the meetings were again rotated between Minneapolis and St. Paul. The annual councils gave the hosting city the opportunity to promote their amenities, show



their hospitality, and leave a favorable impression. Local businesses, who were asked to decorate their stores with the order's colors, profited from the several hundred or more visitors, including delegates from the state lodges, their wives, and other members who arrived for the several-day event. The hosting chapter planned a variety of entertainments, including receptions, banquets, dances, local tours, concerts, stage plays, baseball games, parades, and fireworks. Newspapers provided general coverage of the convention activities. At the council itself, the local mayor and the state great sachem presented welcoming addresses and, on occasion, national officers and other invited guests spoke on diverse topics.<sup>30</sup>

## OFFICIAL BUSINESS PROCEEDINGS

At the annual state Great Council meetings, representatives tended to statewide business. This included electing, appointing, and installing new sachems and committee members and electing representatives to attend the national Great Council convention. Committee reports tracked the status of statewide membership, finance, and so forth. For example, in 1918 the state convention delegates voted to increase each chapter's per capita assessment to support the dependents of 369 members then serving in the armed forces. The state council at times also instructed its national representative to propose resolutions or to cast specific votes at the national Great Council meeting.<sup>31</sup>

Because the national order required state councils to adopt national changes in rules, laws, rituals, and other matters, the state conventions also acted on these and other issues as they arose. Some required major changes by the state council. A new 1903 national constitution for



*The Red Men of Minnesota donated an ambulance to the base hospital at Camp Dodge, Iowa, in about 1925.*

the national and state Great Council governing structures established separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In 1908, a new national law prohibited saloonkeepers, bartenders, and liquor dealers from becoming members of the order, although the rule was not retroactive. In 1914, the national order turned over control of the Orphans' and Widows' Fund to state Great Councils.<sup>32</sup>

Although the Minnesota Great Council exercised general authority over local chapters and sought to protect and advance the best interests of the organization, the heart of the IORM lay in the local lodges and their members, whose commitment to the rules and rituals of the order were key to the continued success of the organization at all levels. As happened with similar societies, the number of Minnesota chapters varied over the years, with some becoming defunct and new ones established. Likewise, membership in the various lodges differed in number and changed frequently according to recruiting effectiveness, quality of leadership, competition from other secret societies, and other factors. The largest growth occurred in 1900, with the

institution of 26 new lodges. After reaching its peak of 53 extant lodges in 1901, the Minnesota Great Council began a slow but persistent decline in these numbers. No new chapters have been instituted since 1919.<sup>33</sup>

Members met at least twice a month in their "wigwam" to conduct official activities as well as to provide various entertainments for members and guests. Meetings followed a formal procedure, with minutes recorded in a minute book. Official business included an opening and closing ceremony and, as the occasion required, adoption of new members, initiation of current members into the higher degrees of the order, and voting ("twigging") on various motions concerning members' affairs. The latter included votes on providing sick benefits for members, relief for orphans and widows of deceased members, funeral benefits, appointment of ad hoc committees to investigate applicants proposed for membership or members suspected or accused of rules violations, and voting on those committee recommendations. Other meeting business included the semiannual election/appointment and installation of

officers, treasurer's reports, approval of tribal expenses, committee reports, planning social activities and fundraisers, and time set aside for practicing degree work.<sup>34</sup>

The fluctuating number of members impacted a chapter's income and expenses. Lodge income originated from quarterly dues; from initiation, degree, and other fees; and from net income from dinners, dances, and other public social events. Lodge expenses, in general, included hall rental or mortgage payments, per capita and other fees owed the Minnesota Great Council, sick and funeral benefits, grave care, fuel, flowers and decorations, refreshments and food, labor, purchase and repair of regalia, purchase of required record and ceremonial books, entertainment expenses, investments, occasional donations toward community improvements, and subscription to *The Speaking Leaf*, the Minnesota area newsletter published by Will E. Cowles in St. Paul.<sup>35</sup>

## MEMBERSHIP POLICIES AND CHARACTER

Chapters had authority to discipline members by reprimand, suspension, or expulsion, but only after a committee investigation of the charge and a secret vote of the members. A member could be suspended or expelled for nonpayment of dues, violation of IORM rules (such as using any of the order's regalia, colors, names, or other practices for "private or individual" purpose), or use of any alcohol within or near the order's meeting place. The 1903 national constitution listed 15 chargeable offenses. Expulsion constituted the most severe punishment of a member, and while it was rare, 49 members of Minnesota lodges were expelled between 1893 and 1918. The Minnesota Great Council expelled a member of the Ron-Hio-Io Tribe of

Minneapolis for actions demeaning the order, but he took his case to the national Board of Appeals, which reversed the decision on the grounds the council followed improper procedure. In Walker, a town adjoining the Leech Lake Reservation, the Flatmouth Tribe expelled a member convicted and sent to federal prison for selling liquor to American Indians.<sup>36</sup>

Such problems with members obviously raised concerns about recruiting practices. Cowles noted that many chapters failed to carefully screen applicants due to "eagerness" to add members. He urged the lodges to use care when seeking new members and for the investigating committee to look carefully into "the character of the applicant [and] be fearless in their report." The black twig—a vote against an action—should be used "when necessary to keep out unworthy palefaces."<sup>37</sup>

Suspensions, primarily from failure to pay dues, were so high in Minnesota and nationally that, as Cowles had earlier cautioned, a 1911 report attributed the problem to member recruitment and inadequate investigation of potential members. The report also linked member nonpayment of dues to dissatisfaction with aspects of the order, including poor leaders, dull meetings, and too difficult degree work. To illustrate, between 1893 and 1918, Minnesota chapters had 10,790

adoptions, 9,942 suspensions, and 902 reinstatements of membership. Those figures, however, do not denote the total number of members (veteran and new) or suspensions for each year. For example, in 1899, Minnesota's 18 lodges adopted 727 new members, admitted 30 by card, reinstated 25, suspended 232, expelled 1, and had 30 withdraw, leaving a total membership of 1,532—an increase of 511 from 1898. In 1905, the 47 lodges adopted 317, admitted 16 by card, reinstated 34, suspended 1,323, expelled 5, and had 44 withdraw for a total membership of 3,538 members—actually a decline of 1,039 from 1904.<sup>38</sup>

So, who were these Red Men and why did they join the Improved Order? The organization's constitution and bylaws established strict requirements for membership. As with similar secret societies of that era, a prospective member had to be a free white male, at least 21 years of age, and of "good moral character." In addition, he had to believe in a Supreme Being, be of "sound mind and body," and have a "reputable means of support." The 1903 constitution changed the minimum age to 18 and the maximum to 50, with exceptions possible. It also required each applicant to be a US citizen or have declared citizenship, to be "able to speak and understand the English language," and to have



George Bartosh's IORM receipt, 1924–25.



been a resident of the state for six months prior to application. Native Americans and mixed-bloods could not join, although the evidence suggests exceptions occurred. The order made several unsuccessful efforts to permit Native Americans to apply for membership, but not until 1974 did the national Great Council eliminate the whites-only clause for membership. This raises the question: Why would Native Americans and non-white people want to join such an organization?<sup>39</sup>

IORM member recruitment efforts centered upon middle-class professional and white-collar males. What circumstances led such individuals to join the order and other similar societies? The 1870s into the early 1900s were times of significant industrial and urban transformation. Some historians view the IORM and other secret organizations as “a source of stability amidst the social chaos of modern life.” Mark Carnes, in his *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, argues that initiation and membership in secret societies was a form of passage that “facilitated the young man’s transition to, and acceptance of, a remote and problematic conception of manhood in Victorian America.”<sup>40</sup>

A fascination with rituals may have been central to that passage experience. W. S. Harwood, a literary writer, wrote in 1897 of the “love for novelty and mystery,” the “mysticism of the ritual, [along] with the secret work and the fraternal element,” that provided a “strange and powerful attraction for some men.” At a time when the US government and its citizens sought to eliminate Native American culture, the IORM’s Native American themes, terminology, rituals, and virtues of hospitality, friendship, and charity may have been an added allure, à la Deloria’s “playing Indian.”<sup>41</sup>



At the dedication of a plaque reading, “This tree planted by Chippewa Tribe #10 in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Improved Order of Red Men. May 10, 1934.” Left to right: John H. Jepson, president of Minneapolis Park Board; E. F. Hein, prophet; Otto Wagner, chief; C. A. Marr, past sachem; Thomas Reid, past great sachem.

In addition, the social, business, and economic connections available through membership, along with any psychological import and the order’s accessible welfare benefits, would attract the interest of diverse individuals. The various Minnesota chapters found homes in all regions of the state, from the largest cities (Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, Rochester, Moorhead, St. Cloud) to rural small towns (Wells, Caledonia, Long Prairie, Little Falls, Warren, Perham, Pipestone, and others). With the exception of Walker, the northern chapters were relatively distant from the Ojibwe reservations.

Given this geographic and socioeconomic diversity, it is not unex-

pected that a cross-section of white, middle-class males representing a range of blue- and white-collar occupations, as well as varied ethnicity, age, and religion (but mostly Protestant) dominated the order’s membership in Minnesota. Members included, among others, judges, lawyers, printers, newsmen, physicians, state and local politicians, janitors, clerks, railway workers, businessmen, mail carriers, sheriffs and police, small manufacturers, government employees, teachers, firemen, bartenders, and realtors.<sup>42</sup>

There are, of course, any number of personal, political, social, or economic reasons for joining, including an invitation from a friend or relative.



If members had felt uncertainty about changes they perceived occurring around them—including any perceived potential or actual threats posed to their sense of manhood, status, and well-being, as noted previously by Carnes—membership might offer some stability and order in their lives. We can only speculate, since the reasons for seeking membership were not recorded. The suspension data indicates clearly that a goodly number of members eventually lost interest and dropped out.<sup>43</sup>

The number of Minnesota lodges and their membership continued to decline after 1920. Today, the Minnesota Improved Order of Red Men exists as the Minnesota-Wisconsin Council, with three chapters in Minnesota (Red Wing, St. Peter, and Winona) and one in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. They remain affiliated with the national organization, now headquartered in Waco, Texas. The order retains as one of its defined beliefs the perpetuation of various Native American traditions. But a statement on its website provides what may be a more accurate reflection of its contemporary purpose: the organization, in its own words, “is a patriotic fraternity . . . devoted to inspiring a greater love for the United States of America and the principles of American liberty.”<sup>44</sup> □

## Notes

1. “Reports of Great Councils for the Great Sun Ending July 1901,” *Record of the Great Council of the Improved Order of Red Men*, 1901, 1074 (hereinafter cited as *Record of the GCUS* and year); *Record of the GCUS*, Dec. 1903, 121; David Lintz, director, Red Men Museum and Library, Waco, TX, email to author, Jan. 14, 2020. By 1920, for example, Minnesota chapters had dwindled to 20, with a membership of 2,430 individuals.

2. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 5.

3. George W. Lindsay, Charles C. Conley, and Charles H. Litchman, *Official History of the Improved Order of Red Men*, ed. Charles H. Litchman (Boston: Fraternity Publishing Co., 1893),

618 (hereinafter cited as *Official History*). Use of Native American terminology can be illustrated by several examples: The IORM calendar begins with the Cold Moon (January) and ends with the Hunting Moon (December). July is the “buck moon.” “Sun” is a day; “seven suns” a week; “great sun” a year; “wampum” is money; “hunting ground” the territorial jurisdiction of a “tribe” (lodge). The IORM year was originally based on the Judaic calendar, but in 1865 the order changed that to begin year one at 1492. Under that format, 1865 became year 374 and 1920 would be year 429.

4. *Official History*, 11.

5. “Council of the Order of Red Men,” *lapi Oaye* (The Word Carrier), Nov. 1, 1880, p. 88. The newspaper was published by Stephen R. Riggs and Alfred L. Riggs of the Dakota Mission on the Santee Agency in Nebraska. Copies may be found at MNHS.

6. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 65, 68; Luke Eric Lassiter, “Review of ‘Playing Indian,’” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 835–38.

7. Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 5. See also Ian S. McIntosh, “Review of *Going Native*,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Dec. 2001).

8. E. C. Ballard, blog post, “The Improved Order of Red Men,” Hedge Mason blog, posted May 30, 2014.

9. “Who Are the Red Men?,” IORM website, [www.redmen.org/redmen/info](http://www.redmen.org/redmen/info).

10. *Official History*, 17–29, ch. 5, 247ff., 316–25. The Civil War disrupted the national organization, but it recovered in the years after 1865.

11. *Official History*, ch. 7, 8, 11 passim. Officers of the Great Council of the United States include the great incohonee, great senior sagamore, great junior sagamore, great chief of records, great keeper of the wampum, and prophet. In order to become instituted as a new lodge and apply for a charter, a proposed lodge in states without a Great Council had to have at least 30 “brothers or palefaces” as potential members, while states with a Great Council required at least 20 initial members. Before tribal members could petition the national order to establish a state Great Council, a state had to have five or more chapters, at least 15 past sachems, and a total membership of at least 500: *Official History*, 484–85, 550.

12. The IORM adopted a revised constitution and bylaws in 1903. Tribal elected officers included sachem, senior and junior sagamore, prophet, chief of records, and keeper of wampum; appointed officers included sannap, guard of the wigwam, guard of the forest, and four each of warriors, braves, and trustees. State officers did not include the warriors, braves, and trustees but did add a great mishinewa: *Official History*, 540, 560, 571.

In the 1903 revised constitution and general laws, the governance of state councils was changed to coincide with that of the national Great Council to consist of executive (state coun-

cil officers), legislative (the state Great Council), and judicial (Board of Appeals) branches: *Record of the GCUS*, 1904, 26.

To hold an elective office required an individual member to belong to the chief’s degree, the IORM’s highest degree: *Record of the GCUS*, 1904. All of these documents may be found at the HathiTrust Digital Library, [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org).

13. “Reds Are Coming,” *Red Wing Daily Republican*, Aug. 9, 1902, 3; Aug. 17, 1906, 1, 6; “Gather About Council Fire; St. Peter Order of Red Men,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Feb. 28, 1897, 10.

In 1899, the colors were listed as green, orange, blue, and scarlet: *Record of the GCUS*, 1900, 573. *Official History*, 540; *Record of the GCUS*, 1913, 30; 1895, 795.

As a secret organization, the IORM’s degree work, passwords, rituals, and so on were not to be revealed outside the organization; however, for an example of the rituals for the adoption, warrior, and chief degrees, see Kathleen O’Connor, “A Nation of Red Men,” at <http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternism/redmen.htm>.

Over time, a committee on ceremonies made recommendations for or against changes in the ritual, ceremonies, costumes, etc.: *Record of the GCUS*, 1897, 478; 1898, 949; 1900–1901, 648–49; 1908, 370; 1911, 221; 1913, 109.

14. *Official History*, 478–79. Slight revisions occurred in the 1903 constitution and general laws: *Record of the GCUS*, 1904, 423–24.

15. Will E. Cowles, *The Story of Redmanship* (St. Paul, MN: Speaking Leaf Co., 1905), 81, 82.

16. “In the Wigwam,” *Winona Daily Herald*, Aug. 13, 1898, p. 7; “The Red Men in Convention,” *Winona Independent*, Aug. 12, 1908, p. 6–8; “Red Men in Session,” *St. Cloud Daily Times*, Aug. 9, 1904, p. 2; “Minnesota Red Men Pitch Tents at St. Paul,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 14, 1907, p. 2; “Red Men,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 22, 1908, p. 46.

17. “Reds Are Coming,” *Red Wing Daily Republican*, Aug. 9, 1902, p. 3; “Red Men Take War Path,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 6, 1902, p. 6; “Braves Pour In,” *Winona Daily Herald*, Aug. 22, 1898, p. 1; *Duluth Evening Herald*, Aug. 27, 1900, p. 6; *Winona Independent*, Aug. 12, 1908, p. 6; *Zumbrota News*, Feb. 8, 1901, p. 2; *Labor World*, Apr. 7, 1900, p. 6; *Duluth Evening Herald*, Aug. 29, 1900, p. 1; *Bemidji Pioneer*, Feb. 28, 1901, p. 4; *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 12, 1903, p. 6; *Wabasha County Herald*, Feb. 18, 1904, p. 5; *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Mar. 31, 1895, p. 18; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 11, 1896, p. 5. The national organization later prohibited the use of the terms “squaws and papooses,” but continued to refer to non-IORM members as “palefaces”: Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 217n63.

18. *Official History*, 362, 421, 445; *Record of the GCUS*, Sept. 1903, 425; “The Red Men,” *Minneapolis Daily Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1875, p. 3; June 20, 1875, p. 2; “Red Men Held Picnic at Dayton’s Bluff,” *Minneapolis Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1875, p. 2.

19. “Improved Order of Red Men,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 8, 1887, p. 4; June 26, 1887, p. 5;

Jan. 8, 1888, p. 5; July 22, 1888, p. 11; July 29, 1888, p. 14; "Social Life, Minneapolis," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Oct. 30, 1887, p. 10; "Social Events," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Feb. 18, 1889, p. 3; "Club Socials," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Feb. 24, 1889, p. 13; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 17, 1889, p. 12; "Minor Events," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Mar. 5, 1889, p. 6; "Societies Doings," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Mar. 10, 1889, p. 12; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1888, p. 13; *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 5, 1889, p. 6.

David Lintz, director of the Red Men Museum and Library in Waco, Texas, reports that the museum has virtually no IORM archival material, except for names of the chiefs of records for the early lodges: email to author, Mar. 27, 2018.

20. *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Jan. 18, 1893, p. 4; "Order of Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1893, p. 4; "The Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 12, 1893, p. 14; May 28, 1893, p. 22; June 11, 1893, p. 19; Aug. 20, 1893, p. 13; "IORM," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 19, 1893, p. 21; *Record of the GCUS*, 1893, 213, 270.

21. "The Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 12, 1893, p. 14; "Improved Order Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 22, 1893, p. 15; "IORM," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 2, 1894, p. 3; "The White Red Men," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Nov. 14, 1894, p. 3; "Order of Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1894, p. 8; "The Pipe of Peace," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1894, p. 7.

22. "IORM," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 14, 1894, p. 12; "The Pipe of Peace," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1894, p. 7; "The Reds Are Active," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1894, p. 4.

23. Ch. H. Brown to Honorable Andrew H. Paton, Great Inchoonee, GCUS, Feb. 28, 1895, *Record of the GCUS*, 1895, 761–65. This document contains a brief description of the then 11 lodges in Minnesota.

24. "The Reds Are Active," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1894, p. 4; "Red Men Are Active," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 22, 1895, p. 5; "New Tribe of Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 27, 1895, p. 5; *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 11, 1895, p. 3.

25. "Braves in Council," *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 14, 1895, p. 5; "Red Men of the State," *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 25, 1895, p. 5; *Record of the GCUS*, 1895, 786, 810, 838, 846.

26. "Red Men in Council," *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 21, 1895, p. 7; July 24, 1895, p. 3; *Record of the GCUS*, 1895, 822, 839, 850.

27. "Council Fires Lighted," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1896, p. 5; "Past Sachem's Association," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1897, p. 8; "Order of Red Men," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Feb. 28, 1897, p. 10.

28. "Signal Fires Lighted," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 4, 1896, p. 5; "Red Men Are Coming," *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 25, 1896, p. 4.

29. *Record of the GCUS*, 1896, 115, 116, 168; "Reign of Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 6, 1896, p. 7; "Their Turn Now," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 7, 1896, p. 5; "The Pipe of Peace," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 9, 1896, p. 5; "Daniel Will Lead," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 10, 1896, p. 7; "Will Say

Good Bye," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 11, 1896, p. 5.

The Degree of Pocahontas, the women's auxiliary of the IORM, was first authorized by the national Great Council in 1885. The first Minnesota council was organized, with the name "Neoma," in October 1895 in St. Paul. Officers included Mrs. Joseph Soule, prophetess; Mrs. H. Kelly, Wenonah; L. L. Rotter, Powhattan; and Mrs. P. P. Barthel, Pocahontas. Initial membership included more than 95 women. Today, only two degree councils, in Red Wing and St. Peter, remain in Minnesota. "Are Lady Braves," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1895, 5.

30. For news coverage of the various state Great Council meetings, see the August newspapers for the following cities/years: Winona, 1898, 1908; Brainerd, 1899, 1909; Duluth, 1900; Walker, 1901; Red Wing, 1902; Minneapolis, 1903, 1914, 1916, 1918; St. Cloud, 1904; Little Falls, 1905; St. Peter, 1906; St. Paul, 1907, 1910, 1912, 1915.

31. "The Great Sun Council," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 26, 1897, p. 2; "Prince Chosen Head of Red Men," *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 16, 1906, 21; *Record of the GCUS*, 1904, 333–34, 369; "Red Men Increase Yearly Assessment," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 14, 1918, p. 8; "Winona Man Named Red Men's Sachem," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1920, p. 8.

The 1902 convention in Red Wing heard a speech (in Dakota) by Thomas Williams (his English name), a Dakota scout for General Custer's 1874 Black Hills expedition: "The Noble Red Men Gathering," *Red Wing Daily Republican*, Aug. 11, 1902, p. 5, 8; *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 12, 1902, p. 2.

In 1916, Minnesota's great sachem urged all member chapters to pay the dues of their members then serving in "military organizations": "Urges Dues Payment," *Duluth Herald*, June 27, 1916, p. 16.

32. "To Take Trail for St. Cloud," *St. Paul Globe*, July 31, 1904, p. 13; "Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 25, 1908, p. 40; "Red Men Pick New Officers," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 13, 1914, p. 6. See "Constitution of the Great Council of the United States of the Improved Order of Red Men," *Record of the GCUS*, 1903, 352–426.

33. See the annual "Reports of Great Councils—Minnesota," in *Record of the GCUS* for the various years noted. Between 1875 and 1919, a total of 102 IORM chapters were organized in 76 Minnesota cities. Some lasted only a few years. Several cities, such as St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth, had two or more coexisting lodges.

34. "Minute Book and Roll Call, 1902–1906," Flatmouth Tribe No. 22, Walker, MN, copy held at MNHS.

35. "Minute Book and Roll Call," Flatmouth Tribe No. 22. For an example of income and expenses, the Flatmouth Tribe of Walker, Minnesota, in 1903 held a basket social to raise funds for the school library, planted 800 shade trees along Walker streets in 1904, and in 1905

approved donation of \$25 to the city toward a fountain in Central Park: Flatmouth Minute Book, meeting notes, Dec. 8, 1903, and May 30, 1905; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 2, 1904, p. 11.

In early February 1902, the Flatmouth Tribe held a masquerade ball and, after expenses of \$16.50, gained a net of \$42.50. In 1918, Minnesota chapters spent \$5,600 toward relief for members, \$943 for burial expenses, and \$9,000 on "other expenses." Tribal worth was noted at \$30,274: *Record of the GCUS*, 1918, 36.

36. *Record of the GCUS*, 1903, Article IX, Offenses, Practices, etc. of General Laws, 424–25; *Record of the GCUS*, 1904, 418–22; "Newton's Letter," *Illinois Red Man* 3, no. 4 (Jan. 1905): 3; "Minute Book and Roll Call," Flatmouth Tribe No. 22.

Between 1895 and 1918, Minnesota lodges rejected 65 applications for membership. See "Reports of Great Councils" for the years 1895–1918 in *Record of the GCUS*.

37. *The Speaking Leaf* 5, no. 1 (Sept. 1904): 6, on microfilm at MNHS.

38. *Record of the GCUS*, 1911, 29, 224–25; "Reports of the Great Councils," *Record of the GCUS*, 1899, 156; 1905, 140. The term "admission by card" seems to refer to a member of one IORM lodge who wants to apply for membership in a different IORM lodge by, depending on the reason, requesting either a withdrawal or a transfer card.

39. IORM Constitution, Article XIV, *Official History*, 1893, 574; "1903 IORM Constitution, Article II," *Record of the GCUS*, 1903, 416; "Improved Order of Red Men," [wikipedia.org/wiki/Improved\\_Order\\_of\\_Red\\_Men](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Improved_Order_of_Red_Men); "Red Men Elect Officers," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1911, p. 9.

An item in the minutes of the 1907 *Record of the GCUS* indicates that some Native Americans were members in eastern and western lodges; however, they apparently were not legal members, and a motion to legalize their membership did not pass: *Record of the GCUS*, 1907, 57.

40. Mark Christopher Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 1–4, 52.

41. W. S. Harwood, "Secret Societies in America," *North American Review* 164, no. 4 (May 1897): 617–18, 621–22.

42. "The Red Men," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 12, 1895, p. 14; "Red Men of the State," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 25, 1895, p. 5.

43. See also Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 65.

An undetermined number of Minnesota IORM members also belonged to other similar fraternal societies.

44. IORM website, <http://www.redmen.org>.

---

Image on p. 134 courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. All others are from MNHS collections.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

#### **Students and researchers**

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

#### **Teachers**

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

#### **About Illustrations**

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).